

Academy of Medicine Makes Crucial Investment in Tomorrow's Work Force

By Robin Suits

When Christopher Danis, M.D., entered Wright State University School of Medicine in the late 1970s, he recalls thinking, "It was feasible to be able to pay your own way." Today, however, as the average student enters residency more than \$100,000 in debt, that is no longer the case.

Dr. Danis has shared his expertise with medical students and residents alike as a clinical associate professor of surgery since completing a fellowship in hand surgery at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia in 1988. Wanting to do still more to support his alma mater and the medical profession in general, he joined the Wright State Academy of Medicine in 1995, and today serves as its chair. "It's a way to invest in the next generation of medical students, not bricks and mortar," he says.

The Academy of Medicine annually presents academic excellence awards to students in each class. The cash awards help reduce the cost of their education as does the Academy's loan program.

The economic mechanism involved in the Academy's loan program appeals to Dr. Danis, who earned an M.B.A. in health services management from Washington University in St. Louis in 1999. "Because the system of the Academy of Medicine is self-perpetuating funding, it intrigues me a great deal," he says.

The Academy focuses its fund-raising efforts on low-interest loans for Wright State medical students. Since 1985, member-supported Academy programs have circulated almost \$2 million in simple-interest loans benefiting more than 400 Wright State medical students. Used strategically in place of more expensive commercial loans that compound during medical school and residency, Academy loans have saved medical students close to half a million dollars in additional debt burden.

The low-interest loan program for Wright State medical students is one of the best available anywhere in the nation, according to Paul Carlson, associate dean for student affairs and admissions. The program has one of the lowest interest rates (5 percent) and longest deferrals of

payment (four years after graduation) available. Best of all, the Academy has achieved a 99 percent payback rate on its loans.

Loans are awarded to students in good standing based on financial need. More than \$600,000 has been awarded since 1998. While academic achievement is not the major factor in selecting loan recipients, students in the top quartile of their classes have received close to 30 percent — and students in the second quartile have been awarded more than 26 percent — of the loans over the past five years. Historically, one in five loan recipients were Miami Valley residents at time of admission to medical school and three out of five chose residencies in the state of Ohio.

Founding Dean John R. Beljan, M.D., and Frank L. Shively Jr., M.D., first envisioned the Academy of Medicine on a fishing trip. Along with Drs. Richard A. DeWall, Raymond M. Kahn and Sylvan L. Weinberg, they launched the organization in 1977 because they believed physicians in the community were in a unique position to provide financial assistance to medical students at the new school. To mark the Academy's 25th anniversary last spring, all five founders were given special recognition at the Annual Dinner Meeting.

"We discussed how to break down the barriers among the university, community, and medical school and how to unify them into a cohesive force to benefit the people of this region," Dr. Beljan recalled later. "The Academy was created in the spirit of something special that spoke to the excellence of our institution and the quality of the people involved."

In addition to supporting medical education at Wright State, the founders decided the community-based service organization also should serve as a bridge between the medical school faculty and Dayton-area physicians. The Academy established an annual awards program to recognize academic role models among both voluntary and fully affiliated faculty, as well as outstanding residents and medical students.

Immediate past chair Walter Reiling, M.D., makes a simple pitch when he encourages his colleagues to consider joining the Academy of Medicine. "Did you have student aid when you went through medical school?" he asks them. "Where do you think it came from? The fact of the matter is, most of us had some kind of financial aid in medical school. We need to remember that when we think about the future of medicine as a profession."

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Editor's note: Each spring, the Academy of Medicine presents awards to outstanding students, residents and faculty at its annual banquet. This year, the 26th Annual Distinguished Guest Lecture and Dinner Meeting will take place at the Schuster Performing Arts Center on April 30. For more information about the Academy or the banquet, contact Robert Copeland, director of advancement at Wright State University School of Medicine, at (937) 775-2972.